Meet Me In The Woods

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Meet Me In The Woods

by BingoBorrible

Summary

A few months ago, Neil would have given up. If his father had taken everything he cared about from him, he would have gone to his father's study and unlocked that drawer and taken out the gun. But he was taught by John Keating for almost an entire term, and if there's one thing he learned, it's Carpe Diem - seize the day. LIVE the day.

Neil doesn't give up, because you can't seize the day when you're dead, and sometimes rash decisions are the best decisions. He's not going to let his father take everything he cares about away, not acting, not the poets, and so Neil grabs everything that might be of use and steals his father's car. But back at Welton, he discovers that not only does everyone think he's dead, but Todd - soft, innocent, kind, oblivious Todd, who has no clue what he means to Neil - is hurt - and he won't wake up.

Notes

Hey there. I'm Bingo, and this account is pretty new - I have the same name and works up on Wattpad. Don't reckon I'll be writing there a lot anytime soon though, but I might just publish a few new things here. I might edit some details on AO3 that I don't on Wattpad, so you're better off with this account. Enjoy!

Chapter 1: Playlist

Meet Me In The Woods

Lord Huron

How long baby have I been away?
Oh, it feels like ages, though you say it's only days
[...]
I can bring your fears to life
Show me yours and I'll show you mine
Meet me in the woods tonight

Baba O'Riley

The Who

Don't cry
Don't raise your eye
It's only teenage wasteland

Each Day

Oakwhisper

Sing

Travis

Baby
You've been going so crazy
Lately
Nothing seems to be going right
So low
Why do you have to get so low
[...]
Colder
Crying over your shoulder
Hold her

And tell her everything's gonna be fine

Side

Travis

And when time is running out you wanna stay alive
We all live under the same sky
We all will live, we all will die

Stitches

Shawn Mendes

Now I need someome to breathe me back to life
Got a feeling that I'm going under
[...]
Tripping over myself, aching
Begging you to come help

Losing My Religion

R.E.M.

What if all these fantasies come
Flailing around
Now I've said too much
I thought that I heard you laughing
I thought that I heard you sing
I think I thought I saw you try
But that was just a dream
That was just a dream
That's me in the corner
That's me in the spotlight
Losing my religion

Moondust - Stripped

Jaymes Young

Looking at you like a star
From a place the world forgot
And there's nothing that I can do
Except bury my love for you
[...]
I long to hear your voice, but still I make the choice
To bury my love in the moondust
Nothing can breathe in the space
Colder than the darkest sea
I have dreams about the days
Driving through your sunset breeze

In Liverpool

Suzanne Vega

No sound, down In this part of town
Except for the boy in the belfry
He's crazy, he's throwing himself
Down from the top of the tower
[...]
For the last half an hour
He sounds like he's missing something
Or someone that he knows he can't
Have now

Say You Won't Let Go

James Arthur

You lit me up
You made me feel as though I was enough
[...]
I knew I loved you then, but you'd never know
[...]
Just say you won't let go
Just say you won't let go
[...]
And I swear that everyday you'll get better
You make me feel this way somehow
I'm so in love with you
And I hope you know

[...]
'Cause you were always there for me
When I needed you most
I'm gonna love you 'til my lungs give out

A Little Braver

New Empire

Well we met each other at the house of runaways
I remember it perfectly
We were running on honesty
We moved together like a silver lock and key

The Wreck of Our Hearts

Sleeping Wolf

We were drifting all night
Losing hold of the light
But I saw in your eyes I was never alone
Even when it got hard
When the shore was too far
Even there your arms I've always been home
[...]
We lived through the wreck of our hearts
And now we're
Just picking up the pieces
[...]
There's a me without you
But that's not where I belong
Through the waves of the deep
And the storms of the sea
I have you and you me
We're not too far gone

Back To Me

The All-American Rejects

Can't you see? I beg and plead
'Cause when your eyes light up the skies at night
I know you're gonna find your way back to me

People Watching

Conan Gray

But I wanna feel all that love and emotion
Be that attached to the person I'm holding

Perfectly Broken

BANNERS

Everyone's broken and I got this missing piece
Honestly, you fit me like no one
You're perfectly broken for me

Line Without a Hook

Ricky Montgomery

Oh, baby, I am a wreck when I'm without you
I need you here to stay
I broke all my bones that day I found you
Crying at the lake

The Night We Met

Lord Huron

When the night was full of terror
And your eyes were filled with tears
[...]
Oh! Take me back to the night we met
I had all and then most of you
Some and now none of you
Take me back to the night we met

I don't know what I'm supposed to do
Haunted by the ghost of you
Take me back to the night we met

Hold Me Closer

Cornelia Jakobs

Hold me closer, although you'll leave before the sunrise

Love

Lana del Rey

Doesn't matter 'cause it's enough
To be young and in love, ah, ah
To be young and in love, ah, ah
Look at you kids, you know you're the coolest
The world is yours and you can't refuse it

Take Me To Church

Hozier

If the heavens ever did speak
She's the last true mouthpiece
Every Sunday's getting more bleak
Fresh poison each week
"We were born sick"
[...]
I was born sick, but I love it
[...]
There is no sweeter innocence than our gentle sin

In the Embers

Sleeping At Last

May our stories catch fire

And burn bright enough
To catch God's eye
We live and we die
Like fireworks
We pull apart the dark
Compete against the stars
With all of our hearts
Till our temporary brilliance turns to ash
May we live and die
A valorous life
May we write it all down
In cursive light
So we pray we were made
In the image of a figure eight

You Are Enough

Sleeping At Last

You're enough, you're enough, you're enough, you are enough
These little words, somehow they're changing us
You're enough, you're enough, you're enough, you are enough
So we let our shadows fall away like dust
[...]
I promise you're enough, you're enough, you're enough
I promise you're enough, you're enough, you're enough, I promise you

So Cold (The Good Wife Trailer)

Ben Cocks, Nikisha Reyes-Pile

Oh, you can't hear me cry
See my dreams all die
From where you're standing
On your own It's so quiet here
And I feel so cold

Go Solo

Tom Rosenthal

They say it's a matter of time
A thousand days and the sun won't shine
Before I come back to you
And I'm happy, nothing's going to stop me
I'm making my way home
I'm making my way
For your love I will go far
I wanna be wherever you are
I know I'm coming back for you

Chapter 2: Todd

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

An unsure, shaking hand found Todd's shoulder, wiping his dream from his mind. Bummer.

"Todd? Todd."

"Ugh, Charlie", he mumbled. He tried to turn over and get back to his story, but Charlie's hand gently gripped his elbow and successfully eradicated that possibility. Regaining some consciousnes, Todd pried his eyes open.

Charlie's face was tear-stained and the usually so lively boy looked devastated. Immediately, dread curled in Todd's stomach like frozen vapour.

"What is it?", his voice shook, and he looked at the door - there were Knox and Meeks, looking horrified - just as miserable as Charlie, all three of them staring at him with tears in their eyes. Pitts' face was struck, disbelieving, and somehow that scared Todd even more than Knox's grief-filled face. Terrified, Todd glanced back at Charlie - who shattered Todd's world with two words.

"Neil's dead." Charlie's voice cracked on the last word, and Todd found himself paralysed. Still, somehow, he must have moved, for the next thing he knew, he was outside, walking through the snow. The other poets were following him with some distance, jogging to catch up.

It was the cold that did it.

It had only begun snowing last night, Todd realised. He turned around in wonder, remembering how Neil had said he couldn't wait for the snow to fall not too long ago - but there was no Neil among the poets, because Neil was dead, dead, dead, and Todd didn't understand - Neil wasn't dead, he was alive, he always was alive, he was the most alive person Todd knew. But Neil wasn't standing there next to Charlie, he wasn't there between Knox and Pitts and Meeks, he wasn't in the middle of the group the way he always was, and he would never be there again.

As he scanned the lanscape, Todd couldn't help the small, breathless

laugh that escaped him.

"It's so beautiful."

It was beautiful, and Neil wasn't here to see it. Neil would have wanted to see it. Neil would never see it, because Neil was never coming back. Because Neil was dead, dead, dead.

Dead. Dead dead dead.

His blood was roaring in his ears, and with every beat of his heart, the reality sunk in. DEAD. DEAD. DEAD.

NEIL was DEAD.

Todd felt the bile rising in his throat, the sour taste barely registering, but then he was choking - and he turned around and fell to his knees, heaving. The bile and the vomit splattered into the snow, and immediately, the other poets were there - by his side, holding him, and Knox was at his back, pressing his face into the fabric of Todd's robe. But none of them were Neil, because Neil wasn't there, because Neil was dead -

"Todd!"

"It's - okay, Todd."

"It's all right."

But it wasn't all right, it wasn't all right, nothing was all right, Neil was dead and he wasn't coming back - Todd was outright sobbing now -

"Todd, it's okay, it's okay!"

But the tears had begun to seep into - Charlie's? Pitt's? - voice too, and someone pressed a fistful of snow against Todd's mouth, pulled him up. Still, they were talking to him trying to calm him down, but -

"No, he wouldn't, he wouldn't - it was his father!" The wail burst out of Todd louder than they were, drowning them out.

"NO", Pitts exclaimed, but Todd didn't - couldn't - stop.

"It was - it was his father! It was his father - stay with me!" He was crying out now, incoherent nonsense mostly, but one thing he could voice loudly, clearly enough for them to understand -

"His father did it! His father just -"

Again, Charlie intrerrupted him, trying to get him to stop, but Todd didn't realise it had to be painful to them, too. Neil was EVERYTHING, his entire life, the one that had taken him in and included him in the first place, his first friend and his best friend, and he was gonegonegone -

Suddenly, his friends' arms felt restraining, just chains holding him in place, and he had to go, he had to run, he had to follow Neil, find Neil -

With a cry, he ripped himself free from their hold, and there was the dock, there it was, the place that had been so special to Neil, where they had practiced his lines and mock-fought with sticks - there it was, there, just there, where they had been, where Neil had to be -

Sobbing, he fell into the snow, scrambled to his feet, ran -

"Todd!"

"Leave him be!"

Come on, Neil, come on, where are you, you've always been there when I needed you, I need you, I need you now, please don't stop now -

"NEIL!"

The scream ripped from Todd's throat, the only word he knew now, but a symphony, a poem in its own right -

Todd ran, he ran, all the way to the edge of the dock - but there was still no Neil, Neil wasn't there, but the lake was frozen, he needed to run further, he could run further. He could find Neil, he needed to find Neil. And before he knew it, Todd was standing on the lake, on the ice, and he took a step, slipped a bit, regained his balance, and Todd had always been good at ice skating, so he set off, somewhat running, somewhat sliding.

"Todd, no! Don't!"

"Todd! Stop!"

"TODD!"

"Stop!"

"It won't hold you!"

"STOP! TODD!"

His foot hit the ice, once, a bit harder, and hairline fissures spread across the ice. They grew bigger, but he did not notice them, still following Neil, still running, still trying to catch him, him, him, Neil, Neil, Neil.

But then the ground tipped beneath his feet, and for a moment Todd was suspended in the air. Panicked, he ran on the spot, flailing his arms, desperately trying to regain his balance. His eyes panicked and wide, Todd went down, tipping over with the shattered ice.

Cold.

It was the cold that hit him first.

It was so cold, colder than anything he had felt in his entire life. It was so cold it was painful, like a million white - hot needles piercing his skin, but instead of burning him, they froze him, froze his insides, his organs, his senses - Todd could not think about anything else, but then he realised he was in the water - he was in the water, and it was coldcoldcold and he wanted it to stop, but he was also sinking, and he needed to swim, up, up, up, he needed - he needed -

Todd broke through the surface, gasping and thrashing. The screams of his friends reached his ears -

"TODD!!!"

"TODD! TODD!"

"HELP!"

He grabbed at the ice, but his hands slid away again immediately, towards him. The water was pulling at him again, pulling him into itself, its cold, dark, unforgiving body.

Todd clawed at the ice, lost his hold, the water splashed above his head as he went under again - but he fought, and then he was back, head above the water -

"TODD!"

"HOLD ON!"

"Someone get the captain!!!"

But it was so cold, and he was so weak, and why did he feel like he had been crying, he had been crying, what was happening, and his robes were so heavy, and there was nothing he could hold on to - Todd slid away from the edge, back into the water, the cold, unforgiving water, and the edges of his vision were turning dark -

Bubbles left his mouth, and that was when Todd realised he had gone under again. But this time, he couldn't move his limbs, and he didn't try to. He was so far under already - so far - he didn't even feel the cold anymore - somewhere deep in his mind, he knew he needed to swim towards the dark spot in the white because that was the hole he'd created, but it seemed so far away, was shrinking, darkness overtaking his vision -

Todd could hear the blood roaring in his ears, or maybe he was hearing nothing at all, maybe he was hearing the water.

Todd felt as though he were floating, and maybe he was. He felt detatched from his body. Detatched and oh, so tired.

Watching himself sink, he wondered if this was what dying felt like.

The last thing he felt was the burning pain in his lungs, and then someone grabbing the front of his sweater.

Everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

> Sooo. I already edited some things here that were different on Wattpad. I'll post the next chapter tomorrow since I'm out of time. But I promise I'll review all of them and improve them a tad - this work is a few years old after all. Thanks for reading!

Chapter 3: Neil

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil really didn't want to go to military school. He also really didn't want to give up acting, and he really didn't want to leave Welton, because leaving Welton meant leaving his friends and the Dead Poets Society.

There were a few good things about Hellton. There were the poets, his childhood friend Charlie, Knoxious, pathetically in love, Meeks and Pitts, the nerds, even Cameron. And then there was Todd, who he had only known for a bit more than half a term, but who mattered so much already - Todd, who could always make him smile, Todd, with whom he could be himself, even more unapologetically than he could be with Charlie. At Welton, Neil could hope, sometimes. He could hope that maybe he would manage to break away from his father and become an actor instead of a doctor, and that he could live not only that dream, but all his dreams.

The captain's lessons were one of the good things, too, and if there was one thing he had learned in these classes, it was Carpe Diem. Neil wouldn't - couldn't - let his father take control of his life again. There was too much he hadn't done yet, and too much he might never be able to do.

What meaning did his life have now he would never return to Hellton? Neil's thoughts wandered to the revolver in his father's study, locked away in his father's desk. But Neil knew where the key was, he had known where the key was for years, and the weapon had been a constant presence in his mind for the last few years.

A last escape, he had told himself, keep track of your last escape in case he wants more than you can give.

But Neil didn't really want to die. He just wanted out. He wasn't ready for this escape to be the last one, the one with no going back.

Shooting himself would mean really never seeing his friends again, at least not until they died after hopefully long, hopefully happy lives. But he'd be jeopardising that happiness if he shot himself now. Charlie would lose his best friend who he'd been attatched at the hip with

ever since they were seven, the others would lose a friend and companion, and Todd - God, Todd depended on him. He had depended on him ever since Neil had pulled him along for the ride and integrated him into their group. Todd would be lost without him.

Besides, he couldn't seize the day if he was dead.

But which other way was there to leave?

...

Well. Leave.

Neil sprung into action. He rushed over to his wardrobe and grabbed the warmest clothes he could find, along with some shirts for the warmer months. His parents kept two old suitcases in the attic, if he remembered correctly, he would be able to use them - then there was the old sports bag from back when he played in the football club here at home.

The boy rushed through the house, grinning widely and thanking the Dead Poets Society for all the practice in sneaking around. He packed everything he might need, blankets, a sleeping bag, a camping stove, all the food tins he could find, some matches, a book of poetry and some money he stole from his father's office out of spite. His own stuff, or at least the things he cared about most, were at Welton anyways.

Then, adrenaline still pumping through his veins, Neil threw on his warmest sweater and his Welton coat and crammed Puck's crown onto his head. He snuck out of the house, grabbing the car keys as quietly as possible. Twice he stepped onto a creaking floorboard, and once one of the suitcases banged against a wall, but somehow he managed not to wake his parents.

It was still snowing outside. Neil just stood there for a moment, breathing in the freezing air, needles in his lungs. He smiled, a wide, impish grin that lit up more than just his face, and that had teachers running in the opposite direction back at Welton. Neil looked over at his father's car, half coated in snow, and figured this was probably more suicidal than the gun idea.

"Time to learn how to drive that thing, Puck", he grinned to himself and went to toss his luggage into the boot.

"Oookay", Neil muttered, examining the different pedals. Which one

was which?
There was only one way to find out. Neil started the engine.

VRRROOOOOOOOMM

Okay, wrong pedal.

VRRROOOOOOOOOMM

Ah, that one.

The steering wheel is that thing, and it works by turning it - of course it does, you're being ridiculous, Neil.

Not Neil, he corrected himself, he was Puck right now. Neil probably wouldn't steal his father's car to go live in a cave, and Neil didn't wear a crown made of twigs.

Puck laughed out loud.

The car sped through the night across lonely roads. It was probably a good thing there were no other cars in sight, otherise Puck would've definitely been mashed potatoes. Somehow, he managed to stay on the road, which was a miracle in itself, and narrowly avoided two trees.

He could've slowed down, but where was the fun in that?

Whooping and cackling, Puck drove all the way back to Welton. He steered the car onto a lonely path that led into the woods and parked it as close to the cave as he could. At least, he thought he was close to the cave. Still, this area looked a bit more familiar than the rest of the woods, so he figured he had been here before.

True to his assumptions, the cave was only a short walk away. Neil hauled the suitcases and the sports bag into the small cave, and despite the cold - he was absolutley freezing - Neil was still grinning.

Rubbing his hands, the boy considered the rocky space. There wasn't much of it - almost not enough for his sleeping bag. Well, he could just roll it out at night and stash it away during the day. As long as there was enough space for the camping stove, he would be all right. Still, he would have to use that as little as possible, seeing as he didn't have that much fuel for it.

Neil stuffed his luggage between a couple of especially big tree roots

just outside the cave, where it would be relatively safe from animals and the weather. He placed his sleeping bag in a nook at the back of the cave, almost out of sight, and set up the stove on the most even part of the floor he could find. Then, Neil figured he should probably get rid of his father's car somewhere else and drove off again, a bit more carefully this time.

He left it at the train station.

The walk back to the cave was cold and somewhat miserable as the adrenaline of the escape faded. He almost got lost in the woods twice, and when Neil arrived back at the cave, he was wet and shivering so badly he could hear his teeth clatter.

Well. Warming up was his priority now anyways.

The last meeting's fire hadn't burned down to coals entirely. There were a couple of branches that might still burn a bit, and one larger log was only charred. Neil swept away most of the ashes and ripped the introduction out of his father's poetry book. He balled up the pages and stuffed them in between the branches. After tucking a burning match into his pitiful campfire, Neil went to fetch dry clothes.

The cold didn't completely leave his bones, but Neil still fell asleep as soon as he laid down on the sleeping bag.

It was morning when Neil woke. His fire had gone out and most of its warmth had fled already, but at least it looked as though it had stopped snowing. Neil stepped outside and looked around the forest. The snow lay several inches thick, covering the world like a sparkling white down blanket.

"It's so beautiful", he gasped, spinning around to take it all in.

(He was unaware that just at the same moment, another boy was saying the very same words, but with an entirely different feeling in his heart.)

Neil smiled as he remembered how he had anticipated the first snowfall. He'd told Todd about it, who had looked so blissfully happy

in that moment, calm and relaxed. Neil's smile grew softer as he thought about his friend. He couldn't wait to see Todd, tell him about what he'd done and what he was going to do.

But Todd would be in class now, probably worried sick, but also unreacheable. Neil had to wait for a bit.

His sports bag slung over his shoulder, he set off to Welton and snuck around the building into the shed where he knew they kept some of the firewood. It wasn't exaclty stealing when he was most likely still enrolled here and his parents had payed unglodly sums of money to this place for years, he reassured himself. Besides, he needed so little compared to all the teachers who wanted the fire in their office roaring all day.

Neil filled the bag with as much wood as it would carry, then he headed back to the cave.

He didn't notice the commotion by the lake.

Neil's morning was Boring with a capital B. He tried to get the fire going again, which took about half an hour - he checked - and then he made himself a breakfast of baked beans and half a tin of pineapple. For about five minutes, he relished in feeling as if he had teleported into a Famous Five adventure, then he got bored again.

Neil read fifty whole pages from his father's poetry book, then he couldn't sit still anymore and recited his lines. Twice. Then he read some more.

The book wasn't even good. The poems were about as interesting as his father himself.

At least they would be good for starting fires.

Finally, finally, five o'clock rolled around. Chemistry, the last lesson today, would be over now, and Neil could go see Todd.

And the others. Of course he was going to see the others, too.

God, who was he kidding? He just wanted to see Todd. Damn it, he had thought he was past the denial.

Neil pulled his hood over his head as he ran towards the school, just because he always did when he took this path.

He was living in the cave now, he realised. He wouldn't just be visiting it once a week, he would actually be staying there permanentely.

For some reason, that was very weird to think about.

Being part of the Dead Poets Society meant Neil knew exactly how to get to his room unseen. There weren't many students in the corridors, which was a little odd for this time of the day, but Neil didn't think about it very much. Instead, he avoided the few he met and slunk into Todd's and his room.

There was no one there, but that didn't deter Neil. Instead, he just hung up his coat the way he had done a million times and organised his stuff so he'd be able to pack it away more quickly. For some reason, he didn't want to do that until Todd came back. Maybe it would feel better, he mused, to do it with Todd.

Maybe he just didn't want to give his old life up quite yet.

Neil sat down cross-legged on Todd's bed and waited.

"Do you think he'll be okay?"

"I hope so. I couldn't - I couldn't lose them both at once."

"He's going to make it. He's going to be okay."

"Yeah, guys. He'll be fine, he has to. We just have to believe it."

Neil perked up as he heared the voices of his friends approach. They

sounded downtrodden, and Charlie's voice was tearful, but he was here now, so they didn't have to worry anymore, right?

As they passed Neil's and Todd's door, Knoxious glanced inside sadly - before he suddenly stopped short.

"Neil?", he breathed, disbelief in his voice. The others' heads snapped around.

"Hi, guys", Neil grinned at them.

They stood frozen to the spot, gaping at him. Disbelief was etched into their faces, and Neil could feel his face falling slowly, his wide grin fading. Was something wrong? Where was Todd?

"Neil", Charlie suddenly gasped, and that broke the dam. They rushed inside and Neil barely had the time to open his arms before Charlie football-tackled him, the other poets following suit.

"What - How - Oh my God, Neil-" Charlie was laughing through his sobs, hugging him around the stomach so tightly Neil was sure he could hear his ribs creak.

"Charlie? What happened?", Neil asked, confusion colouring his voice.

The other boys let go of him and sat up. Charlie sniffled and wiped his eyes, then he whispered: "Your father called the school this morning. He said you'd shot yourself. He said you were dead." His voice cracked, but Neil didn't even notice. He'd gone numb, staring at Charlie but not seeing him.

"What?", he finally breathed.

"We thought you were dead."

"Oh - oh my God." Neil buried his face in his hands. "Why would he do that?"

"No idea.", Charlie shrugged. "Damn it, Neil, what happened?"

"He was going to send me to military school but I didn't want to go. So I ran away. Took his car and left it at the train station. Moved into the cave."

Suddenly, he lifted his head from his hands.

"Where's Todd?" There was an edge of panic to his voice, and the

feeling spiked when he saw his friends exchange uncomfortable glances.

"Where is he?"

"Neil..." There was a look in Charlie's eyes that scared him. "Todd took the news worst of us. He... he kind of... blanked out. And then he panicked. He ran to the docks... we think he thought he was running after you. But... Neil, the lake was frozen over, and he..."

The air left Neil's lungs all at once. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't move, he couldn't speak, he could only stare at Charlie. Helpless, his mind supplied. You weren't there. You weren't there for him, you couldn't help him. You didn't save him.

"...eil? Neil!"

His friends shaking him brought him back to his senses.

"Is he...?", Neil choked out, not sure wether he could bear the answer.

"What? Oh my God, no, Neil, no! He's alive. But... he went under for a long time. When Pitts pulled him out, he wasn't breathing. He hasn't woken up since, but he'll be okay, Neil. Probably. We think so. The doctor said he has an okay chance of making it."

Neil sagged under the weight of the wave of relief that washed over him.

"Thank God", he muttered. Then he shot up again. "I need to see him!"

"Neil, no!" It was Cameron who stopped him. "You can't or they'll see you."

"So WHAT if they see me? I need to see Todd, now!"

Neil struggled to break his friend's hold and get up from the bed, but Cameron was insitent.

"If they see you, they'll take you back to your father and he'll send you to military school! You won't see Todd ever again! Besides, we need to tell the captain. I think he blames himself, for you and for Todd."

"Well, go tell him then - I need to see Todd."

"You can't, Neil -"

"Damn it, Cameron -"

"Cameron is right, Neil."

"Not you too, Meeks!"

"He's talking sense. You can see Todd later, I doubt he'll wake up until then. And the captain really needs to know. You can't live in the cave, not in winter. He'll help us figure something out."

"I need to be with him, Meeks! I have to be there for him. And I'm not leaving, there's no way I'm leaving."

"Suit yourself, but we really need to see the captain, Neil. It won't take long, and they'll take you away if they see you. You won't be able to stay with Todd if your father sends you to military school."

The fight left Neil. His shoulders sagging, he finally agreed.

"Okay. Let's go see the captain."

Chapter End Notes

> Didn't proofread this one, but the last time I checked it wasn't that long ago. It should be fine.

Chapter 4: John Keating

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was Neil's desk, and it was what had been Neil's book.

The book had a long history for a book. So long that it was not tattered from mistreatment but from use, from its spine being cracked open so many times it didn't quite hold together anymore.
John had found it at the back of his grandfather's bookshelf one day, already slightly worn. When he had pointed it out, his grandfather had sat him down and taught him the value of poetry. From then on, John developed a fascination with words. He had read, devoured, memorised poetry, and stopped by his grandfather's place most days to have tea with him and discuss what he had read and sometimes written. Every time, John had borrowed a new book from his library.

When his grandfather died, he divided his few belongings between four children and nine grandchildren, but it was John to whom he gave his collection of poetry. Especially Five Centuries of Verse, the book most precious to both of them, was to go to his youngest grandson, the problem child, the boy with his head always stuck in the clouds. His favourite, because he had been like that, too.

John had left for boarding school, and he had taken the book with him. Finding himself among a few like-minded boys, John had founded the Dead Poets Society. He had taken up a pen and, after a moment of hesitation, had written instructions onto the first page of the book. It had felt liberating.

They had used the book once a week, and it showed - one day, John had had to glue it back together. But he had never stopped using it.

And then there had been another group of boys, many years later, when he had returned to Welton once more. He was a teacher this time, and John figured it was probably time to pass the book on. He knew the moment the boys asked about the Dead Poets Society.

He'd given it to Neil. But Neil had given it back to him by failing to outlive him.

John buried his head in his hands and allowed himself to cry.

"You're insane -"

"You can't just walk in there!"

"You'll give him a heart attack."

"Oh Captain, my Captain?"

John stilled. Were his ears playing tricks on him or -

Slowly, he turned around, rising from Neil's chair.

He had to grab onto the table for support, almost having fallen back down.

"Neil?", he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

This one, too. I'm bound to check it all sooner or later though.

Chapter 5: Neil

"Neil?"

"Hi, Captain."

"Neil - how - they told me you -"

It was painfully obvious Mr Keating had been crying. His face was red and blotchy, his hair was dishevelled and there were still tear tracks down his cheeks.

"I know, the others told me already. I - I thought about it, captain. But, well, I can't exactly seize the day if I'm dead, can I? So... I ran away."

Keating let out a wet laugh.

"You ran away."

Neil nodded, swallowing hard. The expression on Keating's face hit him hard. There was disbelief and pride and happiness, but most of all, there was relief. His father had never looked at him like that, Neil, thought.

"I'm proud of you, Mr Perry. Here -" Keating picked a book off the table he had been sitting at - his table, Neil realised. He recognised the book, too.

Neil nodded, taking the book from Mr Keating. With a smile, he looked back at his teacher and nodded, his eyes a little wet. "Thank you."

"It's nothing. It's yours anyways", Mr Keating said, regaining some of his usual tone and demeanor.

"No, really. Thank you for everything. I think - I think I would've used that gun if it wasn't for your lessons." Neil didn't really know why he was saying this. He'd never been the type to share his negative emotions or experiences, let alone his suicidal thoughts, and he sure as hell wasn't some wet blanket. But it was worth it, because the captain's face crumpled again, he drew in a deep breath, and hugged Neil.

If this was what a father's embrace felt like, Neil never wanted to leave. He was probably holding on a little too tightly, but so was Mr Keating, and he could've died yesterday night, so he figured he could cut them some slack.

"I'm proud of you", the captain whispered, and that was the final straw. The tears in Neil's eyes spilled over, and while he wasn't sobbing - he wasn't that desperate - he did get Keating's shoulder pretty wet.

"It's okay, we'll figure it out."

"I need to see Todd, but I can't be seen."

"I understand. I'll make sure it's safe. I'm sure your friends will help me, won't you, lads?"

"Aye, aye, Captain!"

Chapter 6: Neil

On the walk to the infirmary, Neil informed the captain and his friends about the events of the past one and a half days in more detail. In hushed tones, of course - they snuck as quietly as possible, avoiding everyone they came across. It slowed them down quite a lot, but it wasn't as if they had a choice.

It was relieving in a way and exhilerating in another to watch Mr Keating come more alive as he told his story, as he played a secret game of hide and seek like a little boy, as he learned more about the story of Neil's life. As he found love, passion, romance and tragedy in Neil's story, Neil's poem of the past few days. The days that had been agony for Keating himself but that he now saw in a different light, too. After all, Keating hadn't been the only one living then, and if a little (a lot) of heartbreak was what it took for his student (his son) to break free, he would take it again and again. He wouldn't even let Neil apologise.

There was barely anyone in the infirmary, which made Neil furious.

"His parents didn't come", the captain informed him in a hushed voice. "They just inquired about whether he would live on the phone and when they were assured he most likely would, they decided they 'might come later'." Quiet fury burned in the teacher's usually happily twinkling eyes, and Neil figured Keating might cover for him if he comitted murder.

"But his brother, Jeffrey, came. He's been with Todd ever since he arrived and I don't think he'll leave because of some feeble excuse, but I also don't think he'll tell on you. He cares about Todd too much for that. The only other one there right now is Nolan and he's only there to convince Jeffrey it wasn't his fault. I should be able to lure him out if I tell him I have something to confess about your 'suicide', Neil. That is, if you're all right with that?"

"Please, do spread some shit about my father."

"All the dirty details", Charlie added. "Like how he told Neil he would rather have a dead son than an actor one. Neil told you about that because that's what he said the last time Neil tried to get a part in a play. And the time he slapped Neil when he was eight because he said

he thought it was mean that he yelled at his mother."

Neil grinned. "Brilliant, Charlie."

"I've got more. Can I come with you, captain?"

"Of course, Mr Dalton. Now come on, I believe Neil wants to visit Mr Anderson."

Charlie winked at Neil as they passed him. "Go get your man, oh knight in shining armour", he whispered.

"Charlie!", Neil hissed, his face bright red.

Charlie just smirked before plastering a very convincing angrily grieving expression onto his face.

Of course Charlie "Nuwanda" Dalton had to be agressive about being sad. What else was new?

"Mr Nolan?"

Keating's voice - without its usual playfulness but stil very much infuriating, interrupted Mr Nolan's monologue. Irritated, he looked up.

"Keating. What is it?"

Keating looked downright miserable, which served him just right, and he was accompanied by the dead boy's friend Charlie Dalton.

"I have something to tell you. It's about the death of Neil Perry."

Keating's voice cracked a little. Good. At least he was feeling guilty.

"Do tell, Mr Keating."

"I was... I was actually hoping we could go somewhere more... apropriate, seeing as Mr Perry and young Mr Anderson were very close. I would suggest my office."

Mr Nolan didn't really fancy trekking through the whole school just to

have a conversation with the man who had almost ruined his school's reputation, but he also didn't want to seem insensitive in front of one of his most successful graduates, so he agreed.

"I'll be right back, Mr Anderson."

Jeffrey didn't respond. He just kept holding onto his brother's hand.

Sentimental.

Nolan didn't see the triumphant smile Dalton and Keating shared.

Neil stepped into the infirmary. Todd was right there, tucked into the very first bed, and Neil couldn't stop himself from drawing in a desperate breath as he saw him lying there.

He had seen Todd asleep many times - it was unavoidable when they shared a room and Todd went to sleep first out of probably all the boys in their year - but he had never looked like this. When he was alseep, Todd usually lay on his side, arms tucked close and blanket pulled tight. He always looked peaceful, relaxed, his face slack and his hair messily covering his forehead. Now Todd lay on his back, perfectly still. His arms were pressed to his sides, holding the blanket in place, and he was deathly pale. In fact, Todd's skin had a greyish tint to it. His usually fluffy golden hair was matted with lake water and lay limply against his temples, brushed out of his face in an attempt to make it look neater. He looked dead.

"Oh, Todd", Neil whispered, desperation and grief colouring his voice.

Hearing an unfamiliar voice in the room made the man sitting next to Todd look up.

"Who are you?", he asked, his voice scratchy. Neil tore his eyes away from Todd's still form to look at the young man.

Of course, Neil knew who he was - Jeffrey, Todd's older brother, the only family member who had bothered to come. But Jeffrey looked nothing like Todd. He had dark brown, almost black hair that was more like Neil's own than like Todd's and slightly spiky in front. He

also had a sharp, well-defined chiselled face, handsome in that crazy intelligent dashing scholar way Neil always thought looked a bit surreal and unapproachable. He had a sharp jawline and high cheekbones and he was tall and lean. There were only two things he had in common with Todd: they had the same eyes and they both looked like death warmed over.

Jeffrey showed as obvious signs of crying as Mr Keating had when they had found him in the classroom. His eyes were gassy and there were tear tracks down his blochy red face, and the bags under his eyes were so prominent it almost looked as if he had two black eyes.

"I'm Neil Perry", Neil mumbled. "I'm one of Todd's friends."

Jeffrey raised an eyebrow.

"Neil Perry? I was told..."

Neil shuffled his feet awkwardly.
"Yeah. I didn't shoot myself, I just ran away. My father lied about that for some reason. Listen, I'm... I'm sorry about what I've done. To Todd. I didn't know..."

"It's not your fault", Jeffrey said, his voice level. He was very clearly trying to see this situation objectively, which Neil appreciated a lot.

"I'm Jeffrey Anderson, Todd's brother. Call me Jeff."

"Call me Neil, then. Todd's told me a lot about you."

Neil slowly approached the bed and threw a questioning glance at Jeff, who nodded. Neil sat down on Todd's other side and grabbed onto his second hand. It was limp and cold to the touch, and Neil felt himself break a little more inside as he threaded his fingers through Todd's unresponsive ones. Instinctually, he began rubbing small circles on the back of Todd's hand.

"He told me a lot about you, too." Jeff scanned his face for his reaction. Neil was hyper aware of the blush colouring his cheeks. "Wrote a lot of letters, at least one each week."

There was a small pause as Neil simply nodded, silent, and kept his gaze fixed on Todd. He didn't really fancy getting interrogated by Todd's older brother now, but Jeff didn't seem to get the hint.

"You matter a lot to him. So much he went pretty much crazy. Ran

across too thin ice, thought he was running after you, apparently." Neil swallowed, overwhelmed with guilt once again. He could've written to Todd. He could've called. He could've left him a note, waited for him around the school all day, anything. Instead, he'd been sitting in the cave, bored out of his mind and not realising Todd needed him.

"He cares about you more than you probably realise. More than I realised."

Gosh, when would this guy shut up already?

"You be good to him, Perry. I don't blame you for what happend, but I'll be watching you. Now -" Jeff stood up, more stiffly than Neil would have expected from a guy his age. "- I'll leave you to it. You look after my baby brother, you hear me, Perry? He needs you. See you around."

He clapped Neil on the shoulder, pressed a kiss to Todd's forehead and then left the infirmary, probably heading off to some sort of guest quarters. Neil was glad to see him leave, if a little surprised.

As soon as the room was Jeff-less, the rest of the poets sans Charlie trudged in. They moved to stand around Todd's bed, but none of them spoke.

Neil was the first to break the silence.

"He looks so sick", he almost whispered hoarsely. "This is all my fault."

"Neil, no. You can't blame yourself for something your father did", Meeks protested.

"I should've - I should've been more careful."

"Don't, Neil. Please. It's really not your fault."

Neil just nodded numbly, not quite believing them despite knowing they were right.

"Could you...?"

They got the hint.

"We'll be outside, keeping watch. We'll whistle the captain's song if someone comes."

Neil gave them a half smile.

"Thanks, guys."

Knox clapped him on the shoulder.

"Anytime."

After his friends had left, Neil finally allowed his face to crumble. He bent over, crying into Todd's shoulder, and held on as tightly to his friend as he dared. Of course, he had known Todd wouldn't hug him back, but it still hurt when the smaller boy just lay there. Neil didn't know how long he stayed like that, but at some point, he must've fallen asleep, because the next time he woke up, it was the next morning and there were Mr Keating and Jeffrey Anderson standing over him.

Neil found himself in a very unfortunate position. He had fallen asleep half in his chair, half on the bed, curled up against Todd's still unmoving form with one hand balled up in Todd's shirt (right over his heart, as if to make sure it was still beating), and he had an excruciating crick in his neck. He was also pretty sure the folds of the pillow had left marks on his cheeks and there were still tear tracks down his face.

"Good morning, Mr Perry", Mr Keating greeted him, smiling his usual jolly smile. Jeffrey on the other hand looked rather disapproving. Neil could feel his face burning.

"Good morning."

"Now, I believe the nurse will be coming soon to check on young Mr Anderson and we have some arrangements to discuss, so I would advise we head to my office for a little while."

Sensing the oncoming protest, Mr Keating raised his hand. "I doubt Todd will wake up during the hour you'll be gone, Neil, and he's also very unlikely to sleepwalk at the moment, so I dare say you can leave him for a moment. Besides, it's time you had something to eat."

"But -"

"No buts, Mr Perry."

"It is necessary that we discuss how to proceed about your future, Neil", Jeff added. "You cannot live in a cave for the rest of the semester, and you certainly cannot go home to your father. Your tuitition for the rest of the term is paid, so you will still be able to attend Welton without any complications, but only for the moment. Also, the school's administration currently believes you to be dead, which might lead to unnecessary complications. We must proceed carefully about unveiling your father's lie and it must be decided who your guardianship shall be passed on to. As I am currently studying law, I believe I might be of some assistance, which is why I will be coming with you. I loathe leaving Todd alone, too, but we really do need to discuss this."

Neil sighed, giving in.

"Fine."

"Wonderful! Well then, let's head to my office, shall we?"

"So it's settled then. I believe you'll be an excellent guardian to Neil, Mr Keating."

"Please, call me captain, Mr Anderson."

Jeff's eyes were twinkling. "Call me Todd's older brother then, captain."

"Very well, Todd's older brother."

Neil was positively beaming.

That was one of the outcomes of that particular discussion. The others were as following, in order of importance:

- Jeff was positive he could get Mr Perry arrested for child abuse and

attempting to fake his son's death.

- they would turn Neil into a tragic hero for the public, a brave young man who had stood up to his criminal father.

- the captain was going to become a hero, too. He'd officially take the role of the caring, attentive teacher who had taken the poor, abused boy under his wing, eventually even giving him a home. He would finally be seen for the person he was.

- they would convince Mr Nolan Neil and the captain were the best possible things to happen to this school since the invention of soap and that no, Keating's teaching methods were not a disgrace (which should be easy once they pointed out the good publicity).

- Todd was to be mentioned as little as possible, and whenever he was, he was to be presented as the kind, caring, talented, wonderful boy he was.

- Neil would finish his education at Welton, the tuitition evenly divided between Jeffrey and the captain. Jeffrey insisted half his allowance should go to Todd anyways seeing as his and Todd's parents always seemed to forget their youngest son needed money, too. That Todd would want Neil to stay at Welton no matter what was crystal clear, so Neil didn't feel too bad. Besides, it felt kind of like screwing with Todd's parents, which was a great feeling.

To say Neil was happy with the outcome of this conversation would be a severe understatement.

Chapter 7: Neil

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No matter how happy he was, Neil was back at Todd's bedside the moment Mr Keating - who had been tasked with scouting the area - announced the coast was clear. He was very glad he didn't have to attend classes at the moment. There was no way he'd be able to focus with Todd ill in the infirmary after almost drowning. Being "dead" had its perks after all.

Todd's condition hadn't improved by a lot, but Neil didn't stray from the infirmary once. When the nurse came in to check on Todd, Neil hid behind one of the curtains separating the beds. When he got bored, he read Shakespeare's All Is True (Heinrich VIII), and at lunchtime, the other poets brought him food and stayed with them as long as they could, providing a welcome distraction.

It was early afternoon when Neil was ripped out of his boredom by a quiet groan. Flinging his book to the side, he scrambled to Todd's side. The younger boy was trying to open his eyes, his hands gripping his forehead. Neil pried them away.

"Whoa there, Toddy. Take it slow."

"N-Neil?" Todd's voice was little more than a whisper.

"Yeah, it's me", Neil whispered, laughing breathlessly with relief.

"Hurts."

"I know. It's all right. Don't move."

"What- what happened?"

Neil hesitated for a moment. "Don't worry about that right now. There's still time later."

But Todd was insistent.

"There... there was... snow? There was a lot of snow, and I was... I was

running... Why was I running?"

He tried to struggle into a sitting position but almost fell back down. Neil had to slip his arm behind Todd's back to keep him upright.

"Careful, Toddy."

"Neil, why was I running?"

"It's not important."

Suddenly, Todd's eyes widened in terrified understanding. His eyes filled with tears as he shivered, grabbing onto Neil's arm.

"Neil - oh my God, Neil, you -"

Neil pulled him into a crushing hug. "Nonono, it's all right - I'm fine, you're fine, everyone's fine -"
Except for Todd's parents once Neil got his hands on them, and his own father of course. They would be very far from fine very soon.

Todd was crying properly, his tears soaking Neil's shoulder. He was shaking like a leaf, his trembling hands grabbing at Neil's sweater, digging his fingers into Neil's back. "They said - they said - Charlie - he said - Neil, they said - you'd -"

"I know, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Todd, I really am, I should've written or called - it was my father, he lied -"

Neil kept rambling a stream of calming words into Todd's ear, trying to calm both of them. He wasn't faring much better than Todd, pulling his friend as close as he could and carding his fingers through his hair.

Slowly, Todd's ramblings slowed until he was just holding Neil, his tears slowly ebbing away.

"They said you killed yourself", he finally whispered, his voice breaking.

"I ran away. But - Todd - you really almost did die. Never ever do that again, okay?"

"Okay", Todd whispered.

"Promise me."

"I promise. If you promise, too."

"I promise."

Todd laughed a teary little laugh and pulled back, studying Neil's face as if he wanted to memorise every inch of it.

"You're okay."

"I'm okay."

They laughed again, together this time, and Todd pulled Neil into another hug.

Chapter End Notes

I... might rewrite this entire thing. Way too sappy.

Chapter 8: Todd

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Todd was drifting, drifting, drifting, in murky water - black, murky water. When had he last seen the sun? He couldn't remember. Slowly but surely, he was rising through the dim, muddy depths, gaining awareness of his surroundings.

Oh. He wasn't drifting.

Todd was lying on an uncomfortable, lumpy bed and he was aching all over. There was a dull pain in his limbs and a sharper one in his lungs and throat, making them feel raw and bloody the way scraped knees stung. Despite every one of his senses screaming at him not to, Todd tried to pry open his eyes. It was so bright - why was everything so bright? It made his head swim even more. He let out a soft groan, his hands flying to his head to quell the approaching headache. Someone grabbed them, though, pulling them away. The light stung, but the hands holding his felt nice, so he let them.

"Whoa there, Toddy. Take it slow." The voice was familiar, soothing.

"N-Neil?"

"Yeah, it's me."

Todd couldn't focus. Everything was swirling around him, even the bed was swaying underneath him -

"Hurts", he mumbled, trying to grasp Neil's hands, but he couldn't move.

"I know. It's all right. Don't move."

"What- what happened?"

Neil was silent for a moment. "Don't worry about that right now. There's still time later."

Fragments of memories came back to Todd.

"There... there was... snow? There was a lot of snow, and I was... I was

running... Why was I running?"

Todd grew anxiouos - there was something bad there, and he needed to see Neil, really see him, not just some meandering brown blob. Besides, the room wasn't spinning quite as much anymore -

Todd tried to sit up, but then the bed lurched and his elbows buckled. He almost crashed back down, but an arm materialised at his back and held him upright. Where was up? Where was down? He was so dizzy.

"Careful, Toddy."

A picture emerged from the depths of his swirling mind.

"Neil, why was I running?"

"It's not important."

Ah, so it was very important.

Why had he been running?

Todd focused on the concerned brown eyes right in front of him, the only part of the room that wasn't blurry. Slowly, the events came back to him.

The floor disappearing beneath his feet - running across the frozen lake - snow, so much snow. 'It's so beautiful.'

Charlie at his bedside, waking him up.

Oh God. Oh no. Nononononono -

Neil.

But Neil was right there, holding him upright because - because Todd almost died - Neil was there, Neil was right there, but Charlie had said - Todd had thought -

He grabbed onto Neil's arm, the one holding him upright, as his surroundings blurred once more.

"Neil - oh my God, Neil, you -"

Todd found himself crushed into Neil's shoulder, and before his brain even caught up with the situation, he was hugging Neil back, grasping desperately at him. Was he really there? Was he truly real? Todd

couldn't help but doubt it, and with a great ugly sob, the dam broke and he cried into Neil's shoulder, but Neil didn't vanish. He stayed there and he was whispering in Todd's ear -

"Nonono, it's all right - I'm fine, you're fine, everyone's fine -"

"They said - they said - Charlie - he said - Neil, they said - you'd -"

He balled his fists into Neil's sweater, cursing his fingers and arms for being so weak still.

"I know, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Todd, I really am, I should've written or called - it was my father, he lied -M"

Neil kept talking to him, being there, he didn't vanish, not even a little bit, and slowly, Todd felt as if he could breathe again.

Neil was alive. He wasn't going to leave. Everything was going to be okay.

Todd stayed where he was, though, even when his breath evened out and his tears dried.

"They said you killed yourself", he whispered into Neil's now very wet sweater.

"I ran away. But - Todd - you really almost did die. Never ever do that again, okay?"

"Okay", Todd whispered.

"Promise me."

"I promise. If you promise, too."

"I promise." Of course, Todd had already known that, but still, a wave of relief washed over him. He laughed and pulled away, wanting to look at Neil. He scanned Neil's face, drinking in every detail of his dearest friend who he'd thought he had lost forever.

"You're okay."

"I'm okay."

Neil laughed and Todd laughed with him, pulling Neil closer again. Before he was fully aware of what he was doing, he was burying his face in the crook of Neil's neck, something he'd never dared to do

before because he'd never seen Neil hug anyone and didn't want to upset him. But Neil let him, hugged him back, even. Maybe they would be okay.

Chapter End Notes

If you want to know why Todd reacted so strongly, he's very dependant on Neil, both because he's in love with him (even though he might not have figured that out just yet) and because Neil is his support person, his constant and except from Jeff, Mr Keating and the other poets the only person who's ever truly cared about him and been there for him. Out of all of these, Neil had the biggest impact on his life with the exception of Jeff, maybe. Also, he almost drowned so he's Not Okay and emotional because he can't really process anything very well right now. Lastly, because of the factors mentioned above, he started hyperventilating a little, which further escalated the situation.

Chapter 9: Charlie

"Dismissed!"

Charlie was already halfway out of the classroom by the time Mr Wilson finished. The other poets save for Neil and Todd were at his heels, and together they rushed towards the infirmary. He hadn't been able to focus all day and he didn't doubt the others felt the same way. Todd had wormed his way into their hearts and it would be a big-ass lie to deny they all had an especially soft spot for the shy boy.

Damn, he hoped Todd was awake by now.

The five of them burst through the doors of the infirmary. Charlie slid to a stop immediately, which resulted in both Knox and Cameron crashing into him.

"Ooof!"

Neil and Todd turned to look at them, wide smiles on their faces.

"Toddy! You're awake!"

"Hi, guys."

Todd looked a lot better, Charlie registered. His hair looked freshly washed and a bit messed up, which was definitely Neil's fault. Most of the colour had returned to his face, and he was sitting up in bed, scribbling what was most likely the outline of a new poem.

He was most likely still even more fragile than usually, though, but that didn't stop the poets from running over to him, whooping loudly and dog-piling on top of him in the world's messiest hug.

"Careful!!!", Neil almost shrieked while Todd laughed, pulling them off ickle Toddykins and checking his loverboy over for any injuries inflicted by yours truly. Relieved loverboy was all right, he allowed them another, much gentlter hug. How truly generous of him.

The poets had been sitting together for some time when Charlie and Neil found themselves alone for a moment, having ventured over to the window.

"Charlie", Neil groaned, dropping his head onto his hands. "I'm so screwed."

Charlie gave him a borderline sympathetic glance. "You've really got it bad, huh?"

"It should be illegal to be that pretty", Neil complained.

Charlie laughed.

"Oh don't pretend you like him for his looks."

"I know! I don't. But still. It should be even more illegal to be so nice and smart and talented and absolutely adorable and that pretty all at the same time."

"Gosh, you're helpless."

"You're not helping, Dalton!"

"Tell him then! He feels the same way, any fool can see it."

"Yes, but... what if he doesn't? What if I'm just a friend to him? What if he isn't even into boys? What if it ruins our friendship?"

"Neil." Charlie put his cigarette out on the windowsill. "He'd never ruin your friendship for something like that. Besides, there is no way the only thing Todd feels for you is platonic affection. The literal only danger is that he's too oblivious and innocent to realise exactly what he feels for you, which I think is very much possible. Otherwise he'd be blushing with a guilty expression instead of an infatuated one."

"Infatuated? Big words, Charlie. Where'd you pick that one up?"

Charlie gave Neil an unimpressed look at his pathetic attempt at a joke.

"Okay, okay", Neil sighed, turning away from Charlie.

"You're no help at all, Dalton."

"Ask Knoxious, then."

"Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"Yes."

"Asshole."

"Lovestruck dumbass."

"Damn it, Charlie."

Charlie chuckled and clapped Neil on the shoulder. "Let's get back to the others, yeah?"

"Yeah."

Later that evening, Charlie watched with a smile on his face as Neil and Todd sat side by side, Neil's arm around Todd's shoulders. They were laughing at something Meeks had said, and Todd put his head onto Neil's shoulder, a blissful smile on his face.

Get a move on, Todd, Charlie thought.

Chapter 10: Todd

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Todd sat in the audience, squashed in between the Welton school nurse and five overly concerned poets. He was nervously nibbling at the skin on his thumb, watching Jeffrey, Mr Keating and Neil fight their case against Mr Perry. It looked good for them - Jeff was excellent, saying just what the jury wanted to hear, and practically oozing cool, professional confidence. Mr Keating was being his normal self, if a little more concerned, and was being Very Sincere about his concerns about one of his most promising students. Said student was being very charming, barely nervous and avoided his father's eye just enough to raise sympathy. Things weren't looking good for Mr Perry, but still Todd couldn't help but worry. Their best bet was making Neil's father seem unstable, Jeff had said, and that particular word had not come up once so far.

"Todd", Pitts whispered, nudging him.

Todd jolted out of his headspace. "What?"

"They want you to talk."

"What?!?"

"Come on!"

Pitts grabbed his arm, pulling him up, and supported him on their way to the podium. Thank heaven for small mercies, because if he hadn't been able to lean onto someone, Todd was sure his legs would have given out under him, he was so scared.

Ghostly white and shaking, Pitts still at his elbow, Todd stood in front of several hundred people, many of which were reporters. With cameras. Flashing cameras.

A panicked look in his eye, Todd looked back at Pitts, who only gave him an encouraging nod and pulled him a little further. Todd dug his fingernails into Pitt's skin without even noticing, but his friend managed not to wince.

"It's all right", the only friendly-looking judge in the jury said with an

encouraging smile. "You can't do anything wrong. Just tell us about what you know about Mr Perry's relationship with his father, and what happened the day you were told he was dead. You are his closest friend, are you not?"

Ah. Todd knew why they thought that. He was the one who had almost drowned himself, after all. Not that they knew that. They did however know he had gotten hurt.

"Uh", he stuttered out, trying to vanish into Pitt's shadow.

"Go on, boy, speak!", an older, unfriendly-looking judge barked, and Todd jumped half a foot into the air.

"It's all right, Mr Anderson."

"Go on, Todd", Pitts whispered, and a couple of encouraging yawps came from the audience.

What did it though was Neil's encouraging smile. Todd took a deep breath and began to speak.

"A-already on my first day at Welton, I met Mr Perry." Todd's voice was quiet, but still he continued.

"He made Neil quit the school annual despite him being the junior editor and really wanting to participate. When he argued, Mr Perry took him out of the room, but he left the door open so we could hear him tell Neil to stop causing a scandal in public. Neil called him 'Sir'. Neil never said anything fond about his father. They didn't even write or call, which I know about because Neil's my roommate. And - and when Neil wanted to play Puck in A Midsummernight's Dream, he had to fake the permission letter because he knew his father would never let him despite acting being his biggest dream. When Mr Perry found out, he was going to make Neil quit despite the play being the next day, and he said he'd be away on a business trip so Neil didn't quit. But Mr Perry came to the play and then he made Neil leave with him. I - I was really scared about what he would do to Neil."
Privately, Todd thought these reasons seemed a lot less solid when said aloud in an official place.

"Thank you, Mr Anderson", the friendly judge said. "Now, if I have understood your friend Mr Perry correctly, you were the one to recognise his father as a serious problem."

"Um - well, I - I suppose I always thought he seemed - cold. Like he

didn't care at all. He just wanted Neil to go to Harvard to become a doctor and didn't care if he had to sacrifice his son's dreams for that."

"Do go on, Mr Anderson."

Todd gripped Pitt's arm a little too tightly and pressed his eyes tight shut.
"Mr Perry reminded me of a man in my neighbourhood. All the kids were scared of him even though he was always polite, and then one day his daughter died. He caught her with a boy and smashed her head into her bedframe."

"So you thought Mr Perry capable of violence?"

"Since the moment I met him, and I didn't just suspect it. I knew it."

Todd really hoped his brother had pulled the physical abuse card already. He wanted to get away from all the cameras, which were too bright and too many. He wanted to hide behind Pitts or, better yet, return to his seat. But there was something else to say.

"I-I also knew Mr Perry had a gun and where he kept it. Neil told me when we were discussing gun laws in school."

Todd took a deep breath.

"I thought he was going to kill Neil like our neighbour killed his daughter and when Charlie told me Neil was dead I was sure he had murdered him."

"Someone get the boy a glass of water, please."

"He just has to talk", the unfriendly-looking jury member grumbled. The other poets sent him looks so venomous he paled a little as he met Neil's eye.

"It was a traumatic experience for him", the friendlier jury member hissed. "The poor boy almost lost his best friend!"

Doucebag looked like he wanted to say something else, but now Nice Guy was glaring at him, too.

Doucebag shut up.

"If I may, your honour?" Cameron's - Todd swore that boy could teleport - pompous voice had never been as effective as it was now.

"I think that I, as a long-term aquaintance of Neil Perry with some more distance and objectivity might be able to shed some light on the situation. ?ermission to speak?"

"And you are?"

"Richard Cameron, your honour. Classmate and friend of Neil Perry and Todd Anderson."

"Permission granted, Mr Cameron."

"Mr Perry did not appear in school often. When he did the boys whispered behind his back because he looked so strict. He liked to scold Neil in public places, quietly enough that only those right next to him could hear what was being said. I have heard what he said on several occasions and can confirm that it was often threats of punishment, physical or otherwise. In the other cases it was lectures on the importance of Neil's grades and medical school."

"Thank you, Mr Cameron. Are you well again, Mr Anderson?"

Todd gave a small nod.

"Do you think you could explain in how far Mr Perry reminded you of your neighbour?"

"I suppose he always gave me the impression of a messenger of doom because he only ever came or called when there was bad news. You could never tell what he was going to do next. He just seemed so unpredictable, like he could either declare his dislike for you or slit your throat any moment. He just seemed like someone who'd hurt you and enjoy it."

"You think him unstable?"

Who would've thought it would be Todd who made them come to this conclusion?

"I suppose so, your honour."

"Thank you, Mr Anderson. Your insight was most helpful. You can sit down now."

Todd went back to his seat, flanked by Pitts and Cameron. Even though he appreciated the support his friends' new overprotectiveness after the lake incident was beginning to get on his nerves, but he

would never call them out on it.

He was so, so glad he had had the courage to say something. He thought he might have really helped with that just now, which was an insanely good feeling to have. He wanted Neil to be free. After all, he was...

Like a brother to me, was what Todd had been about to think. But that wasn't quite true, was it? His feelings for Neil were nothing like his love for Jeff, if you ignored that the basic concept was the same. But Neil was more than just a regular friend, too. A... special friend? His best friend? No, that wasn't quite it, either.

Oh my God, he realised suddenly. I'm in love with Neil Perry.

The revelation didn't feel strange, it didn't even feel new - and he didn't have time to reflect on it. He had to pay attention.

Todd felt like he was glowing as he watched the trial play out.

I'm in love with Neil Perry.

Chapter End Notes

> I am not going to bother researching and correcting legal proceedings I wrote two or three years ago. They're roughly accurate, anyways.

Chapter 11: Neil

Neil was practically glowing with pride. Not only had Todd managed to speak up in front of several hundred strangers and the press, but he had also unintentionally wrapped said room around his finger without even realising it.

That was the moment Neil knew they had won. Todd had won them over, they loved him already, Neil saw it on their faces. Well, except for Doucebag, maybe, but he didn't count anyways.

It didn't take very long after that for the judges to decide Mr Perry's sentence. Neil didn't really care about that, though, seeing as it didn't matter to him anymore. He was officially Mr Keating's charge now!

The hammer hit the pad, and the poets broke out into yawps. Neil beamed, a relieved laugh leaving his mouth.

Jeffrey clapped him on the shoulder, a proud look on his face, and Mr Keating proudly wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

Neil avoided his father's scalding gaze.

As soon as they stepped outside the official area, the poets slammed into him, Charlie at the lead. He rugby-tackled Neil to the ground, yawping and going down with him, and the rest of the poets dog-piled on top of him. Cameron, who was protesting, was dragged down by Knoxious and landed flat on top of Charlie, who let out a big Ooof. Pitts was still pulling Todd along and the two of them jumped onto their weird hug pile together, cheering.

When they somehow managed to struggle to their feet, Charlie had somehow managed to latch onto Todd so he was giving him a piggyback ride. Todd's expression was absolutely priceless as a boy quite a bit smaller than him gallopped around the room with him on his, whooping loudly while the only thing Todd could do was hold on for dear life.

The cameras were still flashing, and Neil supposed they were going look both dumb and amazing in the newspapers. He couldn't bring himself to care, not now, when he was laughing amongst his friends.

(There were photos of Mr Perry, too. He looked like a very angry, constipated black - and - white tomato.)

Mr Keating and Jeffrey drove them back to Welton where they were welcomed by Nolan. The entire school had to sit through a speech on the importance of responsible adults in teenagers' lives and the poets, Mr Keating and Jeffrey were called to the front, where Nolan sang Jeff's praises (Mr Anderson was always one of our most promising students, bla bla bla, barf), grudgingly complimented Mr Keating, talked about Neil like a little child and a damsel in distress and ignored the rest of the poets.

Neil had never been so glad to get out of the assembly hall.

Mr Keating shooed them outside to get some fresh air while Jeff and he went to his office to have a cup of tea and talk about the day. Neil also had a sneaking suspicion Mr Keating had discovered Jeff was fond of Oscar Wilde and desperately wanted to grill him about his favourite works.

So the poets headed outside, subconsciously gravitating towards the lake like they always did. Neil secretly glanced at Todd to see whether he was bothered by it, but his friend didn't seem to mind.

"I'm telling you she's my girlfriend now!"

"Sure, Knoxious. She is - for now. Won't be long until she gets over her denial."

"Denial for who?!?"

"Ginny Danbury, of course! Are you blind, Overstreet? They act like an old married couple!"

"They don't fight."

"Old married couple without the fighting!"

"That's contradictory."

"You're just trying to convince yourself, Knox. They're in love. Get yourself some eyes."

Todd raised an eyebrow at Neil, his face flushed with laughter.

"Chris isn't the only one who's in denial, is she?"

"He's been in denial for three years. Ever since Knox came to Hellton."

Todd snorted.

"Welton's infamous playboy has been in love with one of his best friends for years. Go figure."

He's not the only one, Neil thought as he looked at Todd with a fond smile. Todd caught his eye and smiled back, blushing a bit.

"RACE YOU TO THE LAKE!", Charlie hollered and they were off, shoving each other in a playful chase.

"TO INDEED BE A GOD!", the god of dramatics and stupidity screamed at the sky, only to get a snowball directly to the face.

"Oh, that's it!" Charlie grabbed a fistful of snow and pelted it back at Neil, but hit Meeks. That was the final straw, and a bitter seven way war broke out in which alliances formed and broke apart in mere seconds.

Meeks and Pitts pitted together permanentely at one point and began relentlessly pelting Charlie and Cameron with snowballs. Cameron tried to run away but was stopped by Neil who grabbed the back of his coat and washed his face with snow. Knox fell onto his butt, making all of them laugh, and Todd proved to be absolutely abysmal at snowball fights. He couldn't throw to save his life, so he just took to hiding behind Neil and giggling softly, which Neil didn't mind at all. Charlie gave him a knowing smirk and waggled his eyebrows, which resulted in Neil shoving snow down the back of his coat, and Charlie would deny the noise he made until his dying day. Neil would never forget The Time Charlie Dalton Shrieked Like A Little Girl.

Finally, all of them fell into the snow, exhausted, and stared up to the snow cloud white sky.

"You know", Todd finally said, smiling as he turned his head to look at them. "They declared the lake safe today."

"You sure, Toddy?", Charlie asked, concern evident in his voice. "I'd fully understand if you weren't ready for that yet."

Todd shrugged. "I'll need to get over it eventually, won't I? Besides, I don't remember all that much about it and the scary part was thinking

Neil was dead."

In a silent show of support, Neil grabbed his hand.

"And I've always loved ice skating."

"Let's go, then", Meeks grinned, getting up.

"But you're taking it easy, Todd", Cameron warned.

They went to get their skates.

The ones who should be taking it easy were Meeks and Pitts. They were terrible. Neil almost wanted to laugh at their hopeless situation.

The two of them were trying hard to keep each other upright, which only resulted in them dragging each other down. It was so pathetically hilarious Charlie did laugh even though he wasn't much better himself.

For a sporty guy, Charlie had absolutely no balance whatsoever. He tried to go quicker than he could but then he couldn't stop, and when he tried to spin and show off, he fell on his butt. Hard. Neil laughed, because laughing at your best friend is something you do.

Cameron was surprisingly decent, calmly skating circles around them and snickering at Charlie's misfortune.

Knox was all right, too, struggling to stay upright but somehow managing to move around without bruising or breaking anything.

Neil himself had never been very big on ice skating, but he considered himself all right. He was somewhere between Cameron and Knox on the skill scale, very much better than Knox but lacking Cameron's unexpected grace and routine. He didn't pay his own skating very much attention, though.

Todd was incredible. He looked like he was flying, gliding across the lake with such grace it left Neil breathless. Todd skated in wide loops, casually shifting from one leg to the other as he performed a one hundred and eighty turn and continued his way, skating backwards.

He even did a small jump once, not one of the crazy spinny ones Neil had seen on TV, but a jump nonetheless. There was something relaxed about Todd out here, Neil noticed. The permanent tension in his shoulders fell away the way it usually only did when he was asleep or caught up in the atmosphere of a Dead Poets Society meeting. Todd was laughing freely, and then he grabbed Neil's hands and pulled him with him, and they spun around laughing, faces alight with glee. As a laugh bubbled up from Neil's chest and Todd laughed with him, he felt the happiest he had since his performance as Puck.

When they got dizzy, Todd let go of one of his hands and pulled him farther onto the lake by the other one, and they raced around, Neil slowly growing steadier on the thin iron blades. Todd did a small pirouette and almost fell, but he caught himself at the last second and they laughed a bit harder, and then Neil tried and failed to skate backwards the way Todd did, and they were practically wheezing.

Screw waltzing, Neil thought as Todd grabbed his hand again, if we could stay like this forever, I wouldn't ever grow tired of it.

Todd's face was flushed pink with the cold and the excercise, and he looked he didn't want to leave either.

Neil recalled something he had once heard about love.

Being in love is like having a best friend, but better.

That evening, Todd and Neil had snuck out to the docks after curfew. Here, out in the icy cold and almost - dark of a sunset just gone by, Neil felt like he could finally breathe deeply after an eventful day. They were just sitting, as calm as could be, and staring across the frozen lake. There was no need for words and so they didn't speak, revelling in the silent understanding that came with each other's company. Neil glanced at his friend, who was sitting with his right leg dangling off the dock and his chin proppred up on his left knee. He was looking off into the distance, smiling dopily at something with that expression that made Neil really, really want to know what he was thinking about.

For the first time that evening, Neil wanted to break the silence. And

because he wasn't very good at restraining himself, he did.

"Todd?"

"Mmh?", Todd turned to look at him, that dopey smile still on his face. Todd had been a lot less nervous around him since the accident, Neil noted.

He couldn't not tell him, he realised. Not anymore. He had to tell Todd or he would combust.

"There's something I need to tell you."

Todd's eyebrows knitted together in that adorable way they did, but he didn't look confused or concerned, so Neil took that as a reason to keep going.

"I'm in love with you."

Todd drew in a sharp breath. Neil fixed his eyes on the younger boy's face, unable to look away for even a second lest he miss Todd's reaction.

"You... Me? You're in love... with... me?"

Gnawing anxiously on his bottom lip, Neil nodded. Todd laughed shakily, running a hand through his hair.

"Oh God. Oh God, you... you... I can't believe it."

"Todd?" Neil's voice was uncharacteristically unsure.

"Oh. Oh. Right. Sorry. It's just", Todd looked at him again.

"You? In love with me? That - that's incredible. That's impossible. I would've thought this was impossible just this morning. I thought this was impossible just this morning. Oh my God Neil, I just realised I'm in love with you this morning."

Neil's eyes widened.

"You love me back?!"

"Of course I love you back, Neil!"

Neil laughed shakily, pulling Todd close to rest their foreheads together.

"Gosh, Todd."

"Gosh, Neil", Todd replied giddily, laughing a bit.

"You really scared me for a moment."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologise."

"I never would've thought you liked me back this morning. I never thought I had even the slightest chance."

"Are you kidding? You have every chance with me. I've liked you since that poetry lesson with the captain."

"Which one?"

"The one where you came up with that poem on Whitman the madman and truth of course."

"Really?"

"Really."

"That was ages ago, Neil."

"I know. The wait was worth it, though."

Todd laughed again, relief and something even lighter turning the sound into little more than a soft huff. Neil grinned at finally being able to openly stare at the other boy, and the words tumbled from his lips before he could stop them.

"Can I maybe kiss you?"

The laughter died upon Todd's lips as his eyes grew wide, and he nodded just a bit. Neil leaned a few inches forward and closed the distance between them.

They sat there on the dock, obscured from view by the dark, and the snow began to fall again.

Chapter 12: Todd & Neil

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Todd

Finally, finally everything had returned to normal. The Poets were sitting in the Cave, holding the first meeting since the night of the play. The world had snapped back into place the moment Neil had enthusiastically recited their introduction, and the evening had continued to be an especially cheerful one. Charlie had insisted on performing yet another version of poetrusic and had recruited Knox to play the bongos in the background. Meeks and Pitts had performed another nonsenical poem together, turning it into a little chant and adding an improntu dance routine. To their relief, Knox hadn't read any overly sappy love poems for Chris yet, which probably had something to do with Charlie's comment from the day before. He had recited a droll little verse from memory, though, and it was especially funny because it sounded like something out of a mom poetry booklet. Even Cameron had supplied something entertaining that evening, electing to go for a particularly morbid Shelley poem and falling off his elevated rock seat halfway through.

Of course Neil had put on a one - man - Shakespeare - show, performing particularly funny scenes from A Midsummernight's Dream with great enthusiasm and Puck's crown on his head.

"All right, who's up next?", Charlie called, drumming along on the bongos. "Cameron? You wanna take the fall again?"

"Actually", Todd took a deep breath. "I'd like to read something." He ducked his head at the surprised faces of his friends. "It's a poem by Emily Dickinson. It's called Ressurection. I, uh, I guess I just kind of liked it."

"Go for it, Toddy!"

His face burning, Todd scrambled to his feet and fished the scrap of paper out of the pocket of his coat. Stuttering slightly, he began to read:

"T'was- t'was a long parting, but the- the time
For interview had come;

Before the judgement seat of God,
The last and second time

These fleshless lovers met,
A heaven in a gaze.
A heaven of heavens, the privilege
Of one another's eyes.

No lifetime set on them,
Apparelled as the new
Unborn, except they had beheld,
Born everlasting now.

Was bridal e'er like this?
A paradise, the host,
And cherubim and seraphim
The most familiar guest."

Todd emerged from his little isolated world of words a little breathless, and was met with a goup of beaming poets.

"Well done, Todd!"

"Attaboy, Anderson."

"That's why you're the poet here."

Blushing furiously, Todd ducked back into his seat next to Neil and smiled shyly at his friends. Neil wrapped an arm around his shoulders and Todd returned his friend's - boyfriend's? lovestruck golden retriever smile with one of his own.

Knox went up next, performing an ode to spaghetti he had written himself, and Todd let himself get lost in the familiaity of the meeting. It was a cold night, but Neil's arm was still around his shoulders, warming him up and making him drowsy. Unconsciously, he found himself leaning further into Neil's side as his eyelids began to droop. As his vision began to blur, Todd's head dropped against something warm and solid. A familiar hand brushed along his temple and carded through his hair, and Todd's eyes drifted shut.

Neil

Todd's head grew heavy on Neil's shoulder and Neil could practically

feel himself melting into a puddle on the floor. As gently as possible, he adjusted the sleeping boy on his shoulder, his stomach performing flic-flacs. It was a sense of euphoria that hadn't left him since the previous evening, ever since Todd had confessed he liked him back, since Todd had allowed him to kiss him, since he had stolen a quick peck from his boyfriend that morning.

"Awww, look at ickle Toddy", Charlie cooed. The other poets turned around, smiling at the sickeningly sweet scene. "Out like a light. When are you gonna confess, Perry?"

"Charlie -", Neil hissed wide-eyed.

"Oh, we know, Neil", Meeks interrupted him, speaking softly in order not to wake Todd. "Have for a while now. You're not exactly sublte, you know?"

Neil's looked from one of his friends to the other in confusion. "You - since when?"

Pitts sniggered. "Since forever. Do you even realise how you look at him?"

Carefully and fully aware he was on unfamiliar terrain right now, Neil studied the other Poets' faces. To his relief, he found no hint of disapproval in them - even Cameron was smiling. "And you don't mind?"

"Never", Knox proclaimed earnestly.

"Well, Cameron needed some convincing", Charlie grimaced, glaring at the ginger boy.

"Hey, it's not my fault!", Cameron hissed. "I've only ever been told it's bad news. I don't mind, Neil, I truly don't. Charlie's being an idiot."

Neil relaxed. "Thanks guys."

"Back to the topic at hand", Charlie demanded, glaring daggers at his roommate. "When are you gonna tell him? I'm absolutely sure he feels the same."

He stopped short at Neil's smirk.

"No way."

"Yes way."

"When?"

"Yesterday evening."

"How'd it go?" Charlie was waiting with bated breath for Neil's response, but his best friend's dreamy smile told him everything he needed to know and a gargantuan smirk spread across his face.

"Skip to the dirty details."

Neil could tell his face was probably turning a very impressive shade of red, but he still somehow managed to roll his eyes at Charlie. "There are no dirty details, Dalton. He told me he likes me back. We kissed. That's it."

Charlie leaned back against the stone wall, disappointment etched into every inch of his face, but he knew from the way Neil's face had closed up that he was fighting a losing battle.

"Oh, fine." Suddenly, he lit up. "Hey, that means you get to carry Sleeping Beauty here back to school all alone."

"Screw you, Dalton."

Chapter End Notes

A round of applause for Emily Dickinson please, for being the best poet ever.

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